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As Vollard's lost hoard of masterpieces resurfaces, the death of the 20th-century's greatest art dealer still intrigues

Ben Hoyle

The vault had been sealed ever since a Mr Slomovic opened it in his father's name in 1939, just before the Second World War broke out. It had sat ignored in the cellars of Société Générale in Paris while above ground the city was convulsed first by German occupation in the 1940s, then by the student riots of May 1968 and the biggest urban building programme since Haussmann drove his boulevards through the communes in the 19th century.

Still no word came from the mysterious client and, more to the point, no one emerged to foot the bill for 40 years of unpaid storage fees amounting to about Fr100,000 (then £9,000). So on March 21, 1979, armed with legal permission to enter the vault, a clerk opened its doors to see if anything inside could be sold to offset at least some of the charges.

What he found exceeded even his wildest expectations: a lost hoard of artworks by many of the greatest artists of the late 19th and early 20th century, including Cézanne, Picasso, Matisse, Gauguin, Renoir, Degas, Derain, Bonnard and Man Ray. They had belonged originally to Ambroise Vollard, an art dealer who made a fortune in Belle Epoque Paris and helped to shape our idea of modern art by giving Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Matisse, Picasso and others their first solo shows. Vollard died in murky circumstances shortly before the paintings were deposited at Société Générale. Some experts are convinced that he was murdered.

By cracking open this extraordinary time-capsule the bank had unwittingly begun a new chapter in a story that begins in the Indian Ocean, takes in the thrilling Paris art scene on the verge of a new kind of painting and then turns darker, culminating in Vollard's possible murder, the interventions of a disreputable Corsican dealer and a mobile Nazi gas chamber.

At least the unpaid fees are no longer a worry. Later this month, after three decades of legal wrangling, the bulk of this fabulous collection will be sold by Sotheby's in London and Paris, where it is expected to realise about £15 million. The highlights of the two sales are on show at the New Bond Street headquarters of Sotheby's from today until June 22.

Vollard was born in 1866 on the French island of La Réunion, about 500 miles (805km) east of Madagascar and 120 miles southwest of Mauritius. He was the eldest of ten children born to a strict lawyer from northern France and a second-generation French immigrant mother. Reflecting on his childhood in his autobiography, *Recollections of a Picture Dealer*, Vollard depicts himself as an aesthete who almost fainted at the sight of blood but responded powerfully to the colour of the sky at sunset, flower arrangements and the positioning of a parrot in his parents' garden. He was a hopeless artist ("my *bête noir* was drawing") but a compulsive collector of anything he could lay his hands on, including pebbles and fragments of crockery. "There was something of the collector about me from childhood," Vollard wrote. In 1887, aged 21, he arrived in Paris to study law. Lectures swiftly took a back seat to his fascination with the city and, above all, the second-hand book and print sellers who still line the "quais" of the Seine today.

Ann Dumas, who curated a landmark exhibition of works related to Vollard at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, says that the secret of the dealer's

success was his fearless eye and unrivalled ability to sniff out unknown artists who would go on to redefine the possibilities of painting. However, he needed a push — and it came when his father found out that he was ignoring his studies and “cut off his allowance”.

“Vollard needed to earn his own living so he picked up little drawings and books from the quais and started dealing from a tiny garrett in Montmartre,” Dumas says.

His timing was propitious. “He came to prominence at a time when modern art-dealing itself was coming to prominence. What sets him apart is that he didn’t come from a dealing family. He didn’t have any connections. He started with nothing.”

His first breakthrough was to persuade Manet’s widow to let him buy unfinished paintings left in the artist’s studio after his death, a project that brought him into contact with the likes of Renoir and Degas. Renoir became a lifelong friend, and throughout his career Vollard would rely on artists as clients and sources of information about emerging or neglected talents.

In the early 1890s Vollard moved into a tiny shop, 10ft wide, on the Rue Lafitte, the centre of the art world in Paris and, by extension, the world. It was here that he plotted his greatest coup: the return of Cézanne from more than 20 years of self-imposed exile in Provence. An early member of the Impressionist group, Cézanne was shy and awkward and considered a less naturally gifted painter than many of his contemporaries. But Vollard believed in him enough to invest his wealth in mounting his first comeback solo show. He later recalled how his first glimpse of Cézanne’s *Young Man in a Red Waistcoat* in the window of a paint shop had felt “like a blow to the stomach”.

In 1895 Cézanne was 56 and Vollard 29, but without the younger man’s intervention the entire history of modern art might have evolved differently. As it was, the selection of 150 works painted in the new, mature style would lay the foundations for Cubism, and proved a revelation. With Renoir, Degas and Monet all among the buyers, Cézanne’s reputation with his peers was sealed at last. But his commercial value remained relatively low. Vollard snapped up the whole of Cézanne’s studio four years later. When the price of Cézanne’s soared after his death in 1906, Vollard made a killing that underpinned the rest of his career.

Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, the German stockbroker who became Picasso and Braque’s dealer, once said: “Vollard’s mistakes can be counted on the fingers of one hand.” They might include backing the young André Derain, whose *Arbres à Collioure* is the star attraction of the London Sotheby’s sale, over his fellow “Fauve”, Henri Matisse, who Vollard humiliated when he hosted his first solo exhibition in 1904. He also ignored Cubism and Surrealism.

He did not get much else wrong. Like Larry Gagosian, the most powerful dealer active today, Vollard understood the importance of stoking international demand, lending works judiciously to key foreign institutions and targeting the emerging super-rich in Russia, Japan and the US. Like Charles Saatchi, he bought in bulk from little-known artists and played a long game until the market caught up with him.

This tactic meant that even when Picasso rocketed to superstardom with a different dealer, Vollard still came out smiling because he had all the unsold works from the Spaniard’s debut show that he had staged in 1901 and a cart-load of works that he had bought cheaply from him in 1910.

In other respects Vollard’s way of doing business was a world away from today’s sleek operations. When in the mood “Vollard could sell anything”, Mary Cassatt, the American painter and printmaker said. However, he rarely seemed to be in the mood. Gertrude Stein described him in his gallery as “a huge, dark man glooming”.

“He was not very charming,” Dumas says. “His gallery was shabby. A lot of the Picasso show pictures didn’t have frames and people would be stepping over packing cases.” Most of his best works were kept out of bounds behind a divider at the back of the shop. Picasso explained that “Vollard was very secretive. He knew how to weave a mystery around his pictures to fetch a higher price”. The dealer Daniel Wildenstein recalled how “if you wanted a Cézanne, you had to ask for a Renoir. Then with a little luck he would take out a Cézanne”.

“Nobody could quite pin him down,” Dumas says. “He was physically strange, a very, very big man — about 6ft 4in — whose swarthy looks and dark eyes made him exotic.” Picasso compared his bulbous forehead to a slice of tongue. Others called him a giant ape. Nevertheless, Vollard was vain

and had his portrait painted by all of his favourite artists. “The most beautiful woman who ever lived,” joked Picasso, “never had her portrait painted, drawn or engraved more often than Vollard.” He was close to a few of them, notably Renoir, and detested by others. Gauguin called him “a crocodile of the worst kind”.

Despite his bulk Vollard spoke with a disarmingly high-pitched voice and a slight lisp. He was also prone to falling asleep, or at least pretending to, anywhere and at any time: over dinner, in his gallery, even during a sale. He never married or had children and always lived alone, latterly in a dishevelled Left Bank mansion. Entertaining was done in the bare-walled cellar of his gallery, where for 30 years he held uproarious weekly dinners of Creole chicken curry for a bohemian crowd of artists and collectors. Outside these get-togethers and the buying and selling of works of art, Vollard had no discernable interests other than his passion for print making and commissioning opulent art books. He rarely travelled and never went back to La Réunion.

Then again, Vollard’s uniqueness was part of his mystique. According to Leslie Waddington, one of London’s most successful dealers of the past 40 years, Vollard was “a gigantic figure who formed tastes and was much more aware of things than the critics or the museum people”.

His death was fittingly enigmatic. He was 73 and had been in semi-retirement for years. All that is certain is that on July 22, 1939, his chauffeur-driven black Talbot convertible skidded off a wet road between Paris and his country house near Fontainebleau. The art critic David D’Arcy, a contributing editor for Art+Auction, identifies three main theories for what happened next: Vollard was fatally struck on the head by a Maillol bronze that fell from a ledge behind the passenger seat; he was struck by a large pot containing either cassoulet or chicken curry; he was murdered.

Dumas says that there is “no evidence” for this last possibility. Jean-Paul Morel, author of a recent biography on Vollard, also believes that it was an accident rather than foul play. However, the murder theory is championed by John Richardson, the Whitbread prize-winning biographer of Picasso, who heard the rumour from the mistress of a dealer whose sister had in turn been a mistress of Vollard. “There’s no question about it. He was murdered,” Richardson says by phone from New York.

Richardson believes that the hit was carried out by Vollard’s chauffeur, Marcel Zeien, on the instructions of Martin Fabiani, a Corsican dealer, whom Picasso knew, and who was tied into organised crime. Richardson says that Picasso “showed little surprise” when he told him the murder story.

In 1940 Zeien popped up running an hotel while Fabiani gained control of much of Vollard’s estate. Fabiani later became rich selling art to the Nazis during the war.

Erich Slomovic, the Croatian Jew who deposited the artworks in the Société Générale vault, fits into this muddied picture somehow, though no one is quite sure where. An adventurer who intended to make his name importing Parisian avant-garde culture to Yugoslavia, Slomovic went to Paris in 1936 and appears to have befriended Vollard in his final years.

The older man inscribed books to him and wrote letters of introduction to artists, including Bonnard. At some point the collection that makes up the Sotheby’s sale came into his possession, too. With war looming, he placed them in the vault at Société Générale and spirited an additional 400 works away to Yugoslavia with diplomatic help. His heirs would later claim that Vollard had given Slomovic the pictures to start a museum in Belgrade. Vollard’s heirs successfully disputed this.

When the Nazis stormed into Yugoslavia, Slomovic went into hiding with his artworks near Belgrade but he was betrayed and gassed in a mobile killing unit along with his father and brother. He was 27.

His mother survived to take the pictures to Belgrade at the end of the war but died in a train wreck en route. They were then seized by the new Yugoslav Government and incorporated into the national collection, where they remain.

The pictures in the Société Générale bank vault, meanwhile, were shown in public in 1981 in advance of a planned auction. They then vanished from view when legal letters started arriving. At least 15 people laid claim to the works, including the Yugoslav Government and an Israeli called Mr

Goldfinger. The case was finally settled in favour of Vollard's heirs in 2006. Important questions are still tantalisingly unresolved. What exactly was Vollard's relationship with Slomovic? How much of Vollard's collection is out there still? D'Arcy says that he has seen documents which imply that the Société Générale vault may have been opened after all during the 40 years and could therefore have contained additional works.

The Sotheby's sales, most of which are smaller works on paper, is estimated at between £9 million and £14 million. However, there may yet be masterpieces out there that are unaccounted for. The stash of artworks in Vollard's Paris mansion was never properly itemised. Some estimates say there were 5,000 works, others put the figure closer to 20,000. Nobody knows. In that sense it is an entirely appropriate coda to the tale of a man who seemed larger than life but remained strangely unknowable. "His contemporaries felt that you never quite got the measure of him," Dumas says. The same holds true for anyone seeking to understand Vollard today. "In the end there's always an air of mystery that hangs around him."